

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 474

UD 022 457

AUTHOR Li, Gertraude Roth; Johnson, Winston
 TITLE Ethiopians: The Challenge of Sponsorship.
 INSTITUTION World Relief Corp., Nyack, NY.
 PUB DATE Mar 82
 NOTE 9p.; For related documents see UD 022 455 and UD 022 458.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Cultural Background;
 *Cultural Differences; Foreign Countries; Individual
 Characteristics; Job Application; North American
 Culture; Political Influences; *Refugees; Relocation;
 *Sociocultural Patterns
 IDENTIFIERS Ethiopia; *Ethiopians

ABSTRACT

Included in this report are descriptions of the background, lifestyle, and sociocultural patterns of Ethiopian refugees. Intended to provide information for American sponsors involved in Ethiopian refugee adjustment and resettlement in the United States, the report discusses Ethiopian and American differences in patterns of thinking and behavior that may influence Ethiopian adjustment and reactions to American practices in interpersonal relationships, employment, schooling, religion, social behavior, food habits, time schedules, and politics. The report advises sponsors to have patience and understanding during the initial period of refugee adjustment to the American environment.
 (Author/MJL)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

World Relief Ethnic Profile

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Ethiopians:

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

by

Gertraude Roth Li

March 1982

Winston Johnson

Director of Research and Planning

World Relief Corporation – Refugee Services Division
P.O. Box WRC Nyack, New York 10960 800-431-2808

ED219474

UD 022 457

ETHIOPIANS

The Challenge of Sponsorship

I. Background of the Ethiopian Refugees Coming to the U.S.

Prior to coming to the United States, some Ethiopian refugees may have spent months, occasionally years, in Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, or Kenya. Others obtained tourist visas to Europe and applied for political asylum there. Most of the Ethiopian refugees are young (average 21-23 years), single men who are career minded, speak good English and would like a chance to continue their schooling. Those with completed educations often held good positions in their country before fleeing for political reasons. By and large, the Ethiopians coming to the U.S. are not the poor and illiterate who were displaced by the drought and/or ongoing civil strife.

Ethiopia is a tremendously diverse country, geographically and ethnically. The various traits of the different ethnic groups--there are over forty--fall short of merging into one national culture. Therefore, to assume that certain norms or behaviour characterize all Ethiopians would probably lead to generalizations that do not reflect the Ethiopian reality. Changes toward creating one national culture are slow because the development of Ethiopia started relatively recently and its communication system is still inadequate. Keep the above word of caution about generalizations in mind when reading the profile.

The majority of the people living in Ethiopia (about three fourths of its population) belong to one of three ethnic groups: the Amharas, Tigreans, and Oromos. Members of these three groups also make up most of the refugees coming to the U.S.

In the past, the Amharas, speaking Amharic, the national language, were politically dominant. This does not mean that all Amharas belonged to the ruling group. Political power was exercised by a small group of Amharas, who belonged to the aristocracy, while the majority of Amharas tilled their plots of land just as other ethnic groups did. Genealogically, the Amharas and Tigreans have ties with mid-eastern people. Some time between the 10th and 7th centuries B.C., Semitic speaking people from Southern Arabia came into the area that is now Ethiopia and imposed their rule, language and culture on the indigenous population. They eventually intermarried with them, giving rise to the present-day Amhara - Tigre peoples. Partially because African countries under colonial rule remained quite isolated from each other, many Amharas and Tigreans, especially if Muslim, continued to feel closer to the Mideast than to

Africa until about twenty years ago.

With independence, social interaction started to take place between Ethiopia and other independent countries, which resulted in closer ties and affinity with the rest of Africa. In the 1960's, Ethiopia supported African liberation movements and embraced the pan-African spirit wholeheartedly. Identification with other Africans is becoming the attitude of the present generation, though there may still be some Ethiopians who have retained the former affinity with the Arab world.

Tigreans belong to two groups, those living in Ethiopia proper and those who live in Eritrea. Both speak the same language, Tigrinya. Eritrea was a colony of Italy for more than half a century during which time the Italians built a basic infrastructure in the country. In order to benefit from the products of their colony they established factories and plants to process the primary products of that region, set up cottage industries, started commercial farming, built relatively modern towns, etc. Laborers from the rural peasant economy were employed as wage earners in factories, construction works and commercial farming. Two generations later, when other parts of Ethiopia were still struggling with primitive tools to plow their small landholdings, isolated from the rest of the world, Eritreans had acquired some technical skills and reached a relatively advanced state in their social and economic development. Eritreans would like to keep their identity separate and have been waging a liberation struggle for the last twenty years.

The Oromos are divided into several subgroups with different dialects and ways of life. They are the largest group in Ethiopia, inhabiting almost two thirds of the country, and they feel generally close to the Somalis. Traditionally, the Oromos were oppressed and looked down upon and had little access to education. Perhaps because of their low position in the past, the Oromos have developed strong feelings of equality. They are very hardworking people and seem to do especially well in adjusting to life in the U.S.

II. Unrealistic Expectations

The greatest hurdle to successful adjustment to American life for many Ethiopian refugees lies in overcoming unrealistic expectations. Those who occupied a privileged status in Ethiopia--frequently because their education set them above the uneducated majority--may expect that to continue, but nearly all refugees from Ethiopia have some unrealistic expectations. From movies and contacts with Americans, they saw and heard primarily, and sometimes exclusively, about the better side of American life. Availability of education sounded like a promise: once in the U.S. they would be able to "avail" themselves of this education free of charge.

Those Ethiopians who are waiting in Europe to be accepted by the United States are frequently supported by the European governments or the UN for the length of their stay, often several months. Thus, the original notion that life in the western countries is easy, that without working people have more money than can be earned through hard work in Ethiopia, is reinforced. And if it is so good in Europe, how much better will it be in America!

Certain attitudes among the American people may also come unexpectedly, sometimes like a shock. Ethiopians in the U.S. have felt that some Americans consider them simply "African" - that to these Americans, white and black, Africa is more like a country than a continent. Differences may be clear to Americans when they talk about Eskimos and Mexicans as "Americans", or about Italians and Swedes as "Europeans", but the word "African" still seems to have a connotation of homogeneity to many people in the U.S. The present generation of educated Ethiopians (and other Africans) knows the differences. Even if they are supporters of the pan-African spirit, they are still Ethiopians first--and proudly so--and only secondly, African. Those Ethiopians who feel closer to the Arabic world would like the "African label" even less.

What comes even more unexpectedly to recently arrived Ethiopians is that some white Americans place all African nationals, including Ethiopians, into one category with American black people. If there are cultural differences among "Africans", there are certainly differences between African nationals and American blacks. Ethiopians, in general, knew about and supported the black American movement against segregation and racial discrimination in the 1960's, but most had no direct contact with, or knowledge of, American blacks. The sponsor should always remember that skin color does not make for much common ground. Ethiopians and American black people are very different and may not feel drawn to each other.

III. Orientation

It would be best for all refugees to receive a good orientation of what life is like in America before their arrival in the U.S. At this time, however, Ethiopian refugees receive a mere three hours of orientation in Sudan, while there seems to be none at all in other African countries of first asylum.

Ethiopians need help to cope with the clash between their expectations and the facts of American life. Before they can fully integrate, they will need to adjust to certain attitudes and do some soul searching about what they want out of life in America. Perhaps after a good night's rest, but certainly within the first two or three days after arrival, sit down

with your refugees and talk about expectations. Unless the refugees sort out realistic from unrealistic expectations, they may make undue demands on the world around them. You will need to tell them in what way you can help them and what the limits of your support will be. Make them aware that you are under no legal obligations, that your help is totally voluntary as well as temporary, though your friendship will hopefully last. Give them your patience and respect, and especially during the initial period be generous with your time for them.

IV. Adjustment to Life in America

Pace of Life: Almost immediately after arrival, the Ethiopian refugees will notice that American life is fast. Even in conversation, questions and answers are exchanged quickly and decisions are made instantly. Ethiopians, on the other hand, tend to put off answers to questions that require some decision making or thought, so much so that it may be necessary to inform them that Americans, in general, do not wait for answers.

Interpersonal Relationships: Interpersonal relationships in Ethiopia reflect a view of an aggressive human nature. The Amhara (this may be absent or less true for other groups) assumes that every action of an individual seeks to promote his self-interest. Thus, he looks for what might have been hidden in whatever is said to him and done for him. This attitude of suspicion may lead to a constant concern for self-protection and drive the individual in pursuit of self-interest by whatever means available. The means most often resorted to is the use of ambiguities in communication.

In Ethiopia, people tend to be formal with each other. Saying "no" is considered rude. If one cannot answer positively, other subtle means need to be used to convey the message.

In your home, Ethiopians may be very shy and often talk only when asked. Especially with a group of people, one needs to make an effort to include Ethiopians in the conversation by asking open-ended questions rather than pinpointed ones which to them may sound like a cross-examination. For example, instead of asking, "What did your father do?", you can say, "Tell us about your family."

Religion: Many Ethiopians are Coptic Christians, which compares to the Greek or Russian orthodox church and places more emphasis on ritual than most Protestant churches. Others are Muslims. Even though Ethiopians, in general, feel strongly about religion, many refugees who come to the United States do not align themselves with a church--perhaps partially because of their age. Should your refugees not want to go to church with you, please respect their religious outlook.

Work: Adjustment to work in the U.S. will depend greatly on the social and economic background of the refugee. While the majority of the people living in Ethiopia work very hard in order to derive a livelihood from the land, others with good educations may have worked in a rather relaxed atmosphere and find it difficult to adjust to the aggressive and competitive way of life here. If your refugee was not exposed to manual labor in Ethiopia, he or she may be unwilling at first to consider a low-level job and perhaps prefer to be on public assistance instead.

Tell your refugee that Americans are not afraid to work with their hands. It may not be what everybody likes to do best, but it is part of life; and when one starts out, it is often the only way to move up the ladder of economic success. Explain how you have worked for the things you have. If your refugee is inclined towards accepting public assistance, make him or her aware that welfare has a negative connotation and is difficult to get away from since employers shy away from hiring people with welfare records. A low-level job, on the other hand, can easily serve as a stepping stone to another, better job. Also, a large number of Ethiopians on welfare is likely to influence the number of Ethiopians admitted to the U.S. in the future.

Another Ethiopian person who has gone through the adjustment and does menial tasks willingly would be the best and most effective model for a newly arrived Ethiopian refugee who considers only a white collar job, but is unable to get one.

Schooling: Quite a few Ethiopians come here with the hope of continuing their formal schooling. They will need to know that schooling is available but that it is by no means free of charge. Since the number of scholarships has shrunk considerably during recent years, most students now have to work and study, or work first and then study. Help your Ethiopian refugee to lay out a concrete and detailed strategy of how to reach his or her goal.

Money: There will probably be times when you will want to invite your Ethiopian refugee to join you in an excursion or an evening out. Be aware that in Ethiopia, the person who suggested the plan pays for all expenses. If you want an Ethiopian to join you, but be responsible for his own expenses, or if you offer anything else that you expect to be compensated for, you must say so very clearly and in advance. For example, should there be a need for your Ethiopian refugee to make a long distance call, perhaps to Ethiopia, you can assure him that it is alright to make a call on your phone and that he can pay you back later when the bill comes. If you pay for an expense without saying anything, Ethiopians will not (and according to their understanding) cannot pay you back. In fact, it would be rude for them to reimburse you.

Social Visits: If invited to a meal in someone's home, the Ethiopian etiquette demands extreme modesty. The guest will take a small portion of food and probably will not dare take a second helping. In Ethiopia, the guest is not only urged to eat, but is literally inundated with food and drink. In this way the host makes the guest feel at home and truly welcome. During the second visit, the guest will feel naturally more at home and the urging will not take on the same proportions. In comparison, an American host usually invites the guest only once, at most twice, to please help himself, under which circumstances an Ethiopian guest is likely to remain quite hungry. It would be best for the sponsor, at least initially, to do some extra urging or to simply place the food on the plate, and pour the drink as long as there are no definite signs of refusal. If at all possible, the Ethiopian should be able to eat with the family at the table for a few days before being asked to take food from the refrigerator on his own. Even after such an initial period, he will continue to be shy about taking things.

Privacy: Ethiopians are very sociable people who love to do things together. In America people often like to be alone, especially when they want to concentrate, for instance when studying. In order to do so, they may go into their room and close the door. To an Ethiopian in the household, this might mean that you tried to shut him out and did not like him. Make sure that you tell him that you and probably everybody around you, are very busy and do not have as much time as you would like to be sociable. On the other hand, you may also want to ask your Ethiopian refugee whether he would like some help with his school work, or if he would like to study or do something else together. Quite likely he will appreciate such a suggestion, though he would rarely make the suggestion himself.

Time: Some Ethiopians find it difficult to adjust to our telling of time, which can result in unkept appointments. For an Ethiopian, the day starts at 7am, which is called 1 o'clock. Thus their 9 o'clock is the western 3pm, while our 9am is their 3pm. Simply subtract six hours to change Ethiopian time into western time. Some Ethiopian refugees may take several months before they are truly used to our way of reckoning time. You can help them by habitually adding am or pm when you mention a specific time.

Food: Everyday food and meals will require some adjustment. Some Ethiopians will not want to eat pork. Because of their encounters with Italy as a colonial power, many Ethiopians are familiar with Italian food; but they are used to three, full, warm meals a day. In Ethiopia, people go home for the noon meal, while dinner is usually eaten around 9 or 10pm. Adjusting to American meal times may not be easy. Calling a hamburger or some other fast food product "lunch" will be truly difficult, especially in the beginning.

Politics: Having left for political reasons, many Ethiopians remain very political. You may want to reassure them that America is a free country where you can express your political opinions, but that they would do best to concentrate their efforts on their personal goals until they have established themselves in this country.

Many Ethiopian refugees have survived harsh conditions, especially in the country of first asylum, and it will take time before they feel at home in an American environment. They may feel not only a loss of family and relatives but also miss close relationships with the people living around them. Personal advancement in education or on the job, on the other hand, often provides a feeling of satisfaction.

With patience and understanding you will be able to help your Ethiopian refugee during this important initial period of adjustment.

Permission to reprint is available
upon request. Please contact:
World Relief Corporation/Refugee Services Division
P.O. Box WRC, Nyack, NY 10960
(914) 268-4135 (800) 431-2808

END

DEPT. OF HEW

NAT'L INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

ERIC

DATE FILMED

DEC . 1 1982